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ABSTRACT

Guidelines for creating equitable public school choice programs are offered in this booklet. Section 1 discusses the elements essential to a good public school choice, plan: the reasons for interest in school choice; choice plans in private and independent schools, the history of the school choice movement; and the influences of parents, teachers, and the community on choice plans. The second section describes the ideal school design, learning environments and styles, specialized and alternative programs, and governance plans. Characteristics of good school choice programs are offered in section 3 and considerations for school selections are discussed in section 4. The fifth section describes means for involving and ensuring equal access to all families. The final section describes five successful programs in Cambridge, Massachusetts; East Harlem, New York; Minnesota; Montclair, New Jersey; and Richmond, California. A conclusion is that public school choice must be available to all populations, including disadvantaged groups such as the poor, minorities, and non-English speaking. The appendix lists 12 helpful references. (LMI)

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PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE: *An Equal Chance For All?*

National Committee for Citizens in Education



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PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE:

An Equal Chance for All?

Written by Chrissie Bamber with Nancy Berla,
Anne Henderson, and William Rioux

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INTRODUCTION



--Every parent, regardless of income, should have the opportunity to choose the public school his or her child attends, and

--Every school community should provide a variety of programs and teaching styles to accommodate individual student needs.

We believe the heart of school improvement is providing equal access for *every* family to good quality public schools. Increasingly, states and districts are looking to public school choice as a vehicle for achieving this goal. Is this the answer? Will schools of choice improve overall student achievement? Will some schools, teachers, and families be hurt by choice or left out? These are important questions for all of us to consider.

The appeal of universal school choice is growing, especially among parents who equate choice with the democratic principle of equal rights under the law. The reason is understandable. In most places, only affluent families are able to choose among schools and programs: by enrolling their child in a private school, by moving to a neighborhood which has the school they prefer, or by living in one district and paying tuition to a public school in another district. Families who cannot pay but enroll their children outside their resident district without permission break the law. If caught, they are often fined and their children returned to their assigned school.

Public school choice changes this situation by allowing *every* family in a state, district, or attendance area to choose the school they think will be best for their child. Some schools provide several distinct programs within a single building. In other places, attendance boundaries are removed, and families can choose from any public school in their district or even among schools in other districts.

We at the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE) feel choosing the best school for each child is an important aspect of parent involvement and could improve student achievement. We further believe that programs which give parents an opportunity to be involved beyond the initial selection of their child's school have the best chance of success for students and the school community. Research clearly shows when parents are involved regularly in the day-to-day life of the school, student achievement improves. Gains are greatest for low income and minority children.

The question is, will *all* families be well served by the public school choice plans currently being considered and implemented? Well designed programs have the potential to match students and their families with the learning environments to which they are best suited. But we have these serious concerns: adequate space may not be available in good schools for all parents who choose them, and some programs may not include or adequately inform families who could benefit the most. Rural students, for instance, may not have practical choices if the next nearest school is hours away. Low income children who are not provided with free transportation are effectively barred from choosing a school across town. Children who have no real choice may be left behind in some of the poorest schools in the country. Without sufficient outreach and help for parents whose primary language is not English, without flexible scheduling to allow single and working parents to complete application procedures, public school choice plans will not live up to their promise of giving an equal chance to all students to attend good schools.

This booklet is designed as a practical guide to creating equitable public school choice programs. We hope parents, interested citizens and educators who are considering local or state-wide plans will use it as an introduction. It may also be used as a checklist for those who want to improve choice programs already underway so that all families and all educators can benefit from them. 

OFTEN ASKED QUESTIONS



What are the essential elements of good public school choice plans?

Options--While local and state programs vary widely, every public school choice plan has some policy allowing families to choose from more than a single assigned program or school without first gaining special permission from their school district. Choice may be limited to "schools within schools" (several programs housed in a single school building) or extend to all schools within an "attendance zone" (smaller than the entire district but larger than the immediate neighborhood). *Intra-district* choice opens enrollment to any school in the district, while *inter-district* or *cross district* choice encompasses more than one district, sometimes an inner city and its surrounding suburban districts, sometimes every district in the state. Parents in Ohio and Washington may choose from among public schools in their home district; parents in Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Utah may choose public schools in other districts without paying tuition. High school students may enroll part time or full time in college courses with state funds paying for tuition and books in Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico and Ohio.

Diversity--The convenience of having a child attend school near a parent's work or after-school day care provider may be sufficient choice for some families, but a true choice system offers schools that all teach the basic skills but that have differences among them: open versus traditional classrooms, concentrations in the arts or foreign language, year-round classes, or cooperative learning, something which distinguishes one program from another

in content, teaching philosophy, organization of the school, structure of the school day, etc. Without variety, choosing and attending a different school will have less impact on student performance and parent satisfaction.

Parent and teacher involvement--By definition, every parent who chooses a school for his or her child is involved in an educational decision. But good choice plans don't stop there. They invite and encourage parents and teachers to become involved in molding the philosophy, curriculum, and overall climate of the school chosen so that it becomes a school everyone supports with pride. In this way, choice empowers parents and teachers. 

Why the interest in public school choice?

Public school choice as a major element of school reform nationwide was introduced in 1986. The National Governors' Association endorsed the idea, then President Bush's administration embraced the concept in 1988 and held a number of hearings around the country to gather information about local choice programs and to hear citizen concerns. From the federal perspective, choice is attractive because it gives dissatisfied constituents options among public schools while avoiding the costly, legal quagmire of vouchers or tax credits to private and parochial schools. Public school choice is also popular with state legislators who see it as a vehicle for helping to achieve goals identified during the reform movement of the 1980s:

- 1. Improve school quality.** Using a free market model, schools which prove unpopular and lose enrollment will be forced to change in order to remain competitive.
- 2. Move more decision making to the school level.** When the school principal shares management, budget and program decisions with faculty members and parents, everyone involved feels an

increased sense of ownership, resulting in a stronger commitment to the school.

3. Professionalize teaching and otherwise enhance teacher performance. Teachers who have an opportunity to create distinctive programs and develop the curriculum will have greater potential for success in the classroom.

4. Increase student attendance and effort, and encourage children to stay in school. Students are more motivated to attend and complete programs of their own choosing, and experience more success in programs designed to meet their needs and learning styles.

Some advocates say choice will soon be available all over the country for another reason: it is a constitutionally protected right. The 14th Amendment guarantees citizens equal rights under the law. Because all schools are not equally good, forcing some families to attend poor schools violates their rights. We can expect a test case on this issue. 

Is there interest in choice plans that include private and independent schools?

Yes, though programs which divert public funds to private schools threaten to undermine public schools. When church schools are included, constitutional questions about the separation of church and state are raised.

As school opened in the fall of 1990, the nation's first test of private school vouchers for low income families began in Milwaukee. As many as 1,000 children could receive \$2,500 in tuition payments from state coffers to attend nonsectarian private schools in that city. That is the per pupil amount the state of Wisconsin normally would give to the Milwaukee Public Schools. Though most major

education groups oppose the plan in principle, they agree it will prove an interesting and limited test of a controversial idea.

Proposals where public funds follow students to private and independent schools are not new. They have been circulating for several decades. One receiving considerable recent attention is the plan described by John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe in *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*. Published in June 1990 by the Brookings Institution, the Chubb-Moe proposal calls for a new system of public education in which private schools could apply for public charters. Every student would receive a state funded "scholarship" to be applied to the school of his or her choice. The educational bureaucracy would be stripped away, and each school would govern itself. Parents, not the state, would hold schools accountable for their effectiveness.

Ted Kolderie of the Center for Policy Studies in St Paul, Minnesota, proposes an equally radical way of restructuring schools and providing choice. "Why should school boards have an exclusive franchise to run publicly-financed schools?" he asks in a paper written for the Public Services Redesign Project. Other sponsors could be businesses, colleges and universities, parents, teachers, local or federal government, and local organizations. The state would choose among applicants and hold those chosen accountable for results. Franchisees who failed to meet agreed upon performance standards would not have their contracts renewed. This, says Kolderie, would create consequences for failure to deliver a quality education, something public schools currently do not have. 

What is the history of choice?

Publicly financed schools of choice (including church-affiliated schools) long have been considered a parent's right in most western European countries. In this country, the model for public school choice is the alternative school, which first became popular in the 1960s among dissatisfied parents whose children were not learning in regular public schools.

The late 1970s saw the rise of magnet schools, a second publicly funded option. Magnets select students with special interests (math, science, the performing arts) from a large attendance area. These schools are eligible for federal funds because of their role in achieving voluntary desegregation in urban school systems. While they generally cost slightly more per student to operate than regular schools, magnet schools claim higher attendance levels, higher achievement, and lower dropout rates than other public schools in the same attendance area.

The high level of parent interest in magnet schools has led to the suggestion that *all* schools become magnets, attracting interested students by the distinctive programs they offer and developing those programs based on what parents, students and teachers want their schools to be. Several districts profiled in this booklet have choice programs based on this principle (Cambridge, MA; East Harlem, NY; and Montclair, NJ). 

Can parents, citizens, and educators influence choice plans?

Definitely. In Minnesota, the PTA and League of Women Voters were members of a statewide coalition backing open enrollment for students in grades K-12 and post secondary options for juniors and seniors in high school. Locally, Montclair, New Jersey, parents helped shape and refine their program. Massachusetts provides state funds for the parent planning aspect of choice. Wherever choice is considered, public hearings are held, and often the issue is put to a vote at public referendum. Don't let these opportunities pass in your community. Start early to enlist others who favor an equitable choice plan and make your views known. Seek publicity through your local newspapers, and speak at public forums including your local school board meeting. Form a coalition of like-minded local or state-wide groups including business consortiums and educator associations. Build your power base from the ground up. 

DESIGNING YOUR IDEAL SCHOOL



When teachers and parents become actively involved in designing schools of choice, the possibilities for variety are endless. States continue to require basic subjects and set standards for equity, health, safety, and achievement. But as long as schools of choice meet these requirements, *how* they meet them is left to the school community. A program in Washington State, "Schools for the 21st Century," encourages educators and parents to do this.

Consider the possibilities listed below. Some elements are new and experimental, others traditional and widely accepted. Combine several aspects which seem compatible, if you like. Or add your own ideas. 

Where Children Learn Learning Environments

open classrooms--informal atmosphere with children allowed to move around or sprawl comfortably on the floor as they read or complete their assignments.

traditional classrooms--closed-door room, may have desks in rows and a quiet and controlled atmosphere with few distractions.

storefront classrooms--nontraditional school environment, usually located in the heart of a town or city, has no "principal's office," other authority trappings of regular school buildings. Often favored by older and returning students, those who work part time.

college campuses--cooperative programs between K-12 public schools and colleges provide enrichment activities for younger students and accelerated instruction for the gifted and talented. Postsecondary options programs allow high school juniors and seniors to earn either high school or college credit by enrolling in regular college courses.

schools-without-walls--programs with some or all learning taking place outside the school.

uniform dress--requiring students to wear uniforms as they do in many private schools. Sets the tone for student discipline and concentration, discourages competition among students for expensive clothes and deemphasizes family income and material goods, sometimes a factor in teacher expectations of students. 63

How Children Learn Learning Styles

homogeneous groups--students of the same age and same ability learning together.

heterogeneous or vertical groups--students of different ages and abilities learning together.

continuous progress--each student learning at his or her own pace rather than being tied to a classroom calendar for mastery of skills.

cooperative learning--groups of students learning from each other by completing assignments and projects together. Emphasis on working with others toward a common learning goal, not competing with other students for top grades.

block time--providing longer periods of time than the usual 45 minutes a day for in-depth study. Concentration on one subject at a time (math, science, social studies) for a period of days or weeks or interdisciplinary study (for instance, the history, literature, and religion of the Roman Empire) for several hours a day.

flexible time--varying subjects and length of classes daily.

video instruction--sometimes interactive, provided by local learning channels or satellite hookup. Especially useful to expand curriculum for isolated rural students.

computer-assisted instruction (CAI)--a variety of software installed in personal computers teaching students everything from drill and practice of math facts and vocabulary to simulations of living in other times and cultures. Reduced reliance on teacher lecture ; instead, more personal exploration by students. Special adaptations available to assist physically handicapped and learning disabled students. 

Specialized and Alternative Programs

Montessori--structured environment, self-paced learning stressing use of the senses. Especially popular for young children. Flexible grouping following children's development rather than age grades. A century-old concept named for founder Maria Montessori.

Comprehensive--multiple, parallel curricula in a single school. The "something-for-everyone" approach (most U.S. high schools are of this type). Course work appropriate for college preparation, vocational training, and general courses of study.

Fundamental--emphasis on 3 Rs, other core subjects taught mainly by textbook and lecture, usually with a high degree of discipline and regimentation.

Magnet--concentrating on an area of student interest or talent while fulfilling basic state requirements for graduation: performing or visual arts, math and science, foreign language, computers, gifted and talented. Featuring a particular approach to learning (open, fundamental, progressive) or a particular learning environment (schools-without-walls). Includes enrichment activities like field trips, internships, independent study.

Community Service--volunteering encouraged (may be a graduation requirement). Often combined with seminars or class discussions and term papers. Teaches good citizenship, strengthens communities, often facilitates career choices, or leads to job offers after high school.

Theme--regular subjects taught in context of a special interest area such as the future, international cooperation, cultural heritage. Similar to magnets, though themes in some programs change each year.

Second Chance--programs designed to provide best opportunities for former dropouts and students with behavior problems through special interest studies, mentoring, counseling services.

Teen Parent--day care at school site and parenting classes provided in addition to regular course of study.

Vocational, Technical--a type of school established early in the century to provide training for work in printing, construction trades, food preparation, computer drafting, auto repair, etc. Newer programs include all aspects of a business, not just one skill.

Essential Schools--study ordinarily limited to 4 core areas in middle school and high school. More subjects but fewer students assigned to each teacher. Teacher-developed curriculum. Founder is TheodoreSizer of Brown University.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PUBLIC SCHOOL



CHOICE PROGRAMS

Though every public school choice plan is different, all good programs have some elements in common.

1. Each community sustains good quality, well managed schools.
2. All parents have the opportunity to choose a school for their child and to remain involved in school activities throughout the year.
3. Many distinctive programs are offered, not just one or a few.
4. Time and money are provided to teachers to plan and develop their own programs.
5. An effective system of parent information and counseling is part of the registration process.
6. Free and appropriate transportation is provided, especially for low and moderate income families.
7. Most programs are open to all interested students. A fair and equitable process is used to select students for programs with special admission requirements or those which have more eligible applicants than space.
8. Student assignment and transfer policies do not discriminate against students on the basis of race, economic level, past behavior, test scores, or academic achievement. Students are not selected on a "first come, first serve" basis which could favor the most informed, assertive parents, but randomly or by lottery. Special provisions are made for families who want siblings to attend either the same or different schools.
9. Sufficient space is available in a program for every student who applies, and transfer is granted as long as it does not harm desegregation. (Often this will mean extending more popular programs to more than one school campus.)
10. Parents, teachers and their advocates are involved in decisions about the design and monitoring of programs.
11. Equitable funding is provided for each child attending school. (This includes spending as much on neighborhood schools as on magnets and reducing reliance on local property taxes to finance local schools.)
12. Dollars follow students, rather than dividing funds between sending and receiving school or district.
13. Publicly funded evaluation measures who is being admitted to choice programs and what progress they are making.

Special Services--Before-and after-school day care, bilingual programs, foreign language, etc.

Accelerated Schools--active involvement of all parents required to reach school's goal of bringing all children up to grade level by the end of the sixth grade. Designed for low-income areas by Henry Levin of Stanford University.

HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills)--high expectations, challenging curriculum, and emphasis on problem solving replace remedial work for disadvantaged students in upper elementary and middle grades in this program designed by Stanley Pogrow of the University of Arizona.

How Schools are Run Special Governance Plans

Decentralized versus district control--Some public schools of choice are largely self-operated and self-governed (Manhattan's East Harlem Community School District #4 is an example) while others are controlled primarily by the district's central office (Richmond, CA). NCCE favors decentralized governance because decisions are made by the teachers, parents, and community members who know the children and faculty members at a school and have a high interest in meeting their needs. This organization pioneered the School Based Improvement process described below.

School Based Improvement or school based management--A school site council composed of school principal, teachers and other staff, parents, citizens, and sometimes students makes decisions traditionally reserved for the central office. These may include aspects of budgeting and spending, discipline, hiring and firing, safety, and curriculum. Each council negotiates the scope and limits of its authority with the superintendent, school board and unions.

In some places schools volunteer to use school based management (Dade County, Florida; New York City), while in other places (Chicago, the state of Kentucky) action at the state level imposes the process on schools.

Charter and contract schools--Public schools created and run by someone other than the school district. A number of local districts have formal, written policies which allow parents and teachers to design a new school (Dade County and Tallahassee, Florida; Eugene, Oregon; Milwaukee, Wisconsin) . Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, school districts let contracts with the Urban League and other private, nonsectarian groups to run independent but publicly funded schools. Another model is a group of teachers creating a school-within-a-school, with the permission of a majority of teachers in the building (a plan favored by Albert Shanker and the American Federation of Teachers). Independently operated but publicly funded and accountable, charter and contract schools have the potential to radically change the power structure in local school districts. 87

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR EACH CHILD



The primary question parents should answer in making this decision is "What is best for my child?" Conferring with the child's current teacher (if the child is already in school) may be helpful to gather more information about how the child is adapting to school. Ideally, parents should visit the several schools or programs they are considering to see whether they meet expectations. Schools should do their part by providing written materials, open houses, even computer programs to assist parents with their selection.

Some considerations in choosing a public school are these: 

My Child

- What is my child's learning style?--Does he/she need to move around and explore, or does he/she concentrate better with close supervision and a great deal of structure and discipline?
- Will my child thrive in a large, impersonal atmosphere or would a smaller, intimate learning environment serve him/her better?
- Is he/she frequently bored or unchallenged by schoolwork?
- Does he/she enjoy competing with classmates?

- Is he/she able to complete assignments and keep up with the rest of the class?
- Does my child like to work on a variety of projects at once or prefer concentrated study on one or two subjects at a time?
- Has learning progress been fairly even or does my child need to work on weak areas or become a more well rounded student?
- Does my child have gifts or special skills which need developing?
- Does my child have the English skills to perform well in the classroom or does he/she need bilingual instruction?
- If I choose a school outside our neighborhood, will childhood friendships suffer? (and will I be able to be involved at school and have the support of other parents?) 🏠

The School and its Surroundings

- Does the school have high expectations for all students?
- How well are students achieving on standardized tests? Are all students performing at least at grade level?
- Does the staff have approximately the same racial mix as the student body? Is the staff racially and ethnically sensitive?
- What special programs does the school offer?
- Is the atmosphere warm and welcoming?
- Do displays at the school entrance recognize academic achievement as well as student athletics?
- Do teachers greet students by name in the hallways?
- Is student work prominently displayed? Is the work of high quality?

- Is the school convenient to work or close to home? (may be especially important for young children). If not, is transportation provided?
- Is the neighborhood safe?
- Does the school provide athletics, music, after-school clubs or other special activities?
- Are cultural differences celebrated? Tolerated?
- Does the school offer bilingual education or an alternative for children whose primary language is not English?
- Is parent involvement encouraged? Are parents members of a school advisory council or otherwise given a role in decision making?
- Are conferences with parents held regularly at convenient times?
- Does the school survey its graduates? If so, what do they say about their school? 

Why Parents Choose a Particular School

A Survey of Minnesota parents who used their state's Enrollment Options Program in 1988-89, gave these reasons for transferring their child to a public school outside their resident district.

44%	better curriculum and academics
26%	location—closer to day care, job, or home
23%	more options
21%	social benefits or social problems alleviated
16%	better teaching
14%	more specialized classes
7%	same school parent attended
7%	chance to complete high school or maintain continuity after family move

MAKING CHOICE WORK FOR ALL FAMILIES



School systems which have instituted choice plans confirm that the parents of those students who could benefit most from a school of choice are often the parents most difficult to reach. There are many reasons for this: parents may not understand or speak English; they may feel intimidated by school personnel or distrustful of the benefits of choice for their child; they may lack the information needed to make a good choice; they may be working when registration takes place or embarrassed to reveal they cannot read or write; they may feel overwhelmed by family illness or other crisis, or the daily burden of surviving in substandard housing, on drug-ridden streets.

NCCE's recent work in programs designed to involve low-income, urban parents in their child's education has underscored what we learned earlier: most parents care a great deal about their child's success in school. Still, many find involvement difficult.

Educators must be sensitive to the problems faced by low-income parents and those whose primary language is not English and redouble efforts to engage them. The following suggestions are drawn from public school choice plans already in operation and from advocates for equitable public school choice plans.

1. Provide public information on school choice year round.
2. Set up a local parent information center sponsored by an independent agency or advocacy council for local minority populations. (Schools should not be the only source of information on choice.)

3. Publicize a telephone Hot Line number parents may call for information in English or their native language. If the choice program is statewide, make the number toll-free .
4. Mail information with welfare checks, put it on grocery bags, post it in laundromats and other high visibility locations in the neighborhood.
5. Have written information available in other languages and Braille.
6. Don't rely solely on the written word. Use local radio and television stations and local movie houses to beam voice and visual messages at the community.
7. Spread the word among community organizations. Ask for referrals from legal services, parole officers, social service agencies.
8. Enlist the help of individuals viewed as trusted leaders in the neighborhood: clergy, athletic coaches, corner grocers, Urban League officers. Having these highly respected individuals endorse the program casually in their day-to-day contact with residents may accomplish more than any official information emanating from the school.
9. Let kids tell kids. Students who have benefited from schools of choice make the best recruiters. Engage them as speakers in schools, churches, boys' and girls' clubs.
10. Contact all families participating in local Head Start programs about their choices as they make the transition to kindergarten and all Chapter 1 parents about schools in the area which offer this federally funded program.
11. Send information officers to informal neighborhood gatherings such as club meetings or block parties.
12. Insist that all families meet with an advisor or information officer before making a thoughtful and informed decision about the best school for their child. 

FIVE SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS



The following examples show the variety of public school choice programs operating around the country. Several have been in place long enough to report benefits for children and communities.

Cambridge, Massachusetts--Ethnically diverse Cambridge is one of 15 cities in Massachusetts offering "controlled choice" with racial equity and improved achievement as goals. Begun in 1981 as the final phase of a court-ordered desegregation plan, choice has ended racial isolation in each of the district's 11 K-8, two K-6, and one K-3 grade schools (the district has only one high school). Three out of every five families choose a school outside their neighborhood. The district's Parent Information Center does extensive outreach into housing projects, churches, and community groups. The percentage of children attending public versus private schools in the district has risen from 70 percent in 1981 to 85 percent in 1989. Reading scores are on the rise. Educators see both an overall improvement in achievement and a narrowing of the gap in scores between minority and White students. Because racial balance must be maintained, parents pick first, second, and third choice schools. Over half receive their first choice, and 90 percent receive one of their choices. Those who are not assigned to a "choice" school are placed on a waiting list for future transfer.

District #4, East Harlem, New York--Student achievement scores have risen from last place among 32 community school districts to 16th since this small, densely populated district reorganized its 20 school buildings into 44 programs in the early 1970s. Every junior high student and some elementary students choose their "theme" school. Several unpopular schools have closed while the widely

praised Central Park East Elementary School has been twice cloned and extended through the secondary level. Central Park East is teacher-run with parent input on decisions including the selection of the school's director. Student transportation to schools of choice is not a problem because the district covers only one square mile. Located in a high crime area with many vacant buildings, East Harlem schools were once shunned by students and teachers alike who could find other options. Now these schools have waiting lists for enrollment of out-of-district students and teachers seeking to work in a school where they have a voice in curriculum development and management of the school.

Minnesota--The phase-in of this state's choice program began in 1985 when juniors and seniors in high school were allowed to enroll in college courses at public expense and earn either high school or college credit. By 1987, students aged 12-21 who were not succeeding in their assigned school could choose another one. During the 1989-90 school year, students in large districts (more than 1,000 students) could transfer without permission of their home district. Requests were denied only if they would upset racial balance or if no space was available. About 3,000 students used the "second chance" aspect of the law in school year 1989-90, and 6% of junior and senior high school students exercised Minnesota's post secondary option.

Legislation was passed at the urging of the governor and a broad-based business and citizens coalition including the PTA and League of Women Voters. The state's pioneering open enrollment policies passed despite opposition by both major teachers unions, the state's school board association and organized school superintendents.

School officials in small, rural districts fear the Minnesota choice plan is actually a move to consolidate schools. If some schools close, they reason, teachers will lose jobs, and students will be bused greater distances. So far, that has not happened, and concerns that post secondary options would create a mass exodus of students and funds away from public high schools also have been unfounded. In addition to bringing back hundreds of dropouts, the program has kept some potential dropouts in school, has stimulated

high schools to increase advanced placement courses, and spawned some cooperative programs between high schools and colleges including two-way televised instruction.

Montclair, New Jersey--Boasting one of the most successful choice programs in the nation, this urban/suburban community first tried magnets on a limited basis in 1976. At the time, the district faced loss of federal funding after seven other plans to desegregate, including forced busing, had failed. The magnet program proved so successful that it was expanded in 1985. Now all elementary and middle schools are magnets and district resources have been equalized. Reading and math scores have improved, and programs have changed as a result of parent and teacher input. Helping the program achieve racial balance is the location of the Gifted and Talented magnet (all students who apply are considered gifted) in an African-American neighborhood where it has attracted a number of White students and a fundamental school in a predominately White neighborhood sought after by many African-American families. The district's arts program is affiliated with Lincoln Center in nearby New York City. Despite a curricular concentration at each school, all schools provide a core curriculum. All families must choose a school every year; no children are assigned. Ninety-five percent receive their first choice. Transportation is provided but costs are not great because the district is small. "White flight" has not been a problem in this community where family income is relatively high and the minority population of 49 percent includes many African-American professionals.

Richmond, California--Choice is the centerpiece of school reform efforts which began in this urban, multi-ethnic district in 1987 under the leadership of a new superintendent. All 48 schools in the district have open enrollment. School improvement goals include redesigning curriculum, adding computer instruction, and lowering dropout rates and out-of-school suspensions. Teacher unions complained they were not consulted in the planning stages, but their involvement increases with implementation when parents, teachers, and the principal shape the curriculum within the specialty. Most schools are organized around four specialty themes: gifted and talented (every student is eligible), future studies, classics, and international studies. The district also has

popular Montessori, whole language, and university laboratory (which tests promising new teaching methods) schools. Electives like foreign language, high technology and the arts are available starting in first grade. Specialty options are offered within the state's legal walking distance of three miles from a child's home, so no transportation is provided. Of 31,000 students enrolled, 4,100 have transferred from their closest neighborhood school. At the end of two years, unexcused absences were down 50 percent; suspensions dropped 60 percent; and achievement levels were rising faster than the state as a whole. *[L]*

IN CONCLUSION



To date, over 30 states and hundreds of school districts have considered public school choice in some form. If these plans and those now on the drawing boards are designed with care, they will provide an equal chance for all families to participate. Only then can public school choice fulfill its promise of improving American public education for all children.

But if policy makers ignore the needs of some parents, and implement public school choice plans which favor the same group of assertive, college educated parents who are currently well served by public schools, then public school choice will not result in the achievement gains we hope for. Instead, it will become one more failed experiment which leaves poor children behind in some of the worst schools in the nation. 

HELPFUL RESOURCES



Accelerated Schools for At-Risk Students, by Henry Levin, 1988, 39 pages, Center for Policy Research in Education, Eagleton Institute of Politics, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901. \$4.00.

The Case for Public Schools of Choice, by Mary Anne Raywid, Fastback 283, 1989, 47 pages, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Eighth Street and Union Avenue, PO Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402. \$.90 per copy.

"Challenging At-Risk Students: Findings from the HOTS Program," by Stanley Pogrow, *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1990, pp. 389-397.

Choosing a School for Your Child, Susan Perkins Weston, May 1989, 30 pages, U.S. Department of Education, Single copies free from Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, Colorado 81009. Also available in Spanish.

Coalition of Essential Schools: Theodore R.Sizer, Box 1938, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island 02912. 401/863-3384.

"Guidelines on Parental Choice--in Education," The National PTA, 5 pages. 700 North Rush Street, Chicago, IL 60611.

"How to Pick Your Child's School: A Guide to Selecting the Best School to Meet Your Child's Educational Needs," Minnesota Association of School Administrators, 19884 Como Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108.

"How to Select a School for Your Child: A Family Guide," December 1988, Minnesota Department of Education, Capitol Square Building, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101.

Politics, Markets, & America's Schools, by John E. Chubb, and Terry M. Moe, 1990, 318 pages, The Brookings Institution, 1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20036. \$10.95 (plus \$3.00 postage and handling).

Public School Choice: An Annotated Bibliography, 1990, National Committee for Citizens in Education, 10840 Little Patuxent Parkway, Suite 301, Columbia, MD 21044. \$15 for organizations, \$10 to individuals (plus \$2.00 for postage and handling).

Public Schools by Choice: Expanding Opportunities for Parents, Students and Teachers, Joe Nathan, editor, 1989, 266 pages, Free Spirit Press, 400 1st Avenue North, Suite 616, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401. \$6.95. 800/735-7323.

Public School Choice: Current Issues/Future Prospects, by Dr. Myron Lieberman, 1990, 216 pages. Technomic Publishing Company, 851 New Holland Avenue, Box 3535, Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17604. \$32.50. 

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE:



American Education's Hot Topic

-  What is it?
-  Are we looking at another fad or a solid process for real school improvement?
-  Will "competition" for students improve schools?
-  How does choice support and expand teacher creativity?
-  How can parents get maximum benefit?
-  Will anyone be hurt or left behind?
-  Will public school choice "restructure" school and school districts?